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ABSTRACT

In 1988, the Mississippi State Department of Education provided funds for the creation of a 40-hour staff development module for training the principals and central office staff of state accredited elementary schools to develop comprehensive early childhood programs. Here, the term 'early childhood' refers to programs for children between 5 and 8 years of age. This document describes the content of the training material in terms of phases of program development. Phases discussed concern: (1) definition and development of appropriate curriculum; (2) use of learning centers as an instructional setting; (3) use of assessment measures to stengthen a comprehensive early childhood program of instruction; and (4) development of a practical plan for implementing a comprehensive early childhood instructional program. It is anticipated that by 1990 over 200 administrators will have completed the training. An example of the action plan format suggested for use in Phase 4 is included. (RH)

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Training Public School Administrators to Develop a Comprehensive Early Childhood Program

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Running head: TRAINING PUBLIC SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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Training Public School Administrators to Develop a Comprehensive Early Childhood Program

In a recent report, Right From the Start, the National Association of State Boards of Education again addresses the issue of specialized training for individuals charged with educating young children. The report states that an essential ingredient in quality early childhood programs is a well-trained staff supported by knowledgeable and sensitive administrators (1988). As this report raises the issues of educating personnel, attention should focus on the content and format of such training. Materials developed for training a public school administrator in early childhood education must be structured to provide substance.

The Mississippi Model for Training Administrators

In 1988, the Mississippi State Department of Education provided funds to develop a five day, comprehensive early childhood module for staff development training of principals and central office staff of state accredited elementary schools. (Early childhood, as relating to the training material developed, pertains to children five to eight years of age.) This module was developed in a collaborative manner. Various components were developed by early

childhood educators at four major state supported universities. To promote continuity in the content and delivery of the material, each university developed a training phase or topic relevant to a comprehensive early childhood program. While each phase relates to the others, it is self contained and could be presented independently.

The general objective of the module is to provide school administrators and central office staff with a knowledge base to pragmatically implement an appropriate comprehensive early childhood program of instruction. The information in the module reflects developmentally appropriate practice as described by the Association of Childhood Education International (1970, 1987) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1987, 1988), in curriculum development, instructional techniques employed, and evaluation of teachers and instructional programs in kindergarten through third grade.

The body of knowledge relating to educational programs and practices for young children is massive. In order to select the most relevant topics and research findings for content of the module, the following questions were repeatedly asked: Why would an administrator need to know this? How could an

administrator use this on a daily basis? What kind of training activities should be developed to teach as well as promote participant ownership of the concepts presented?

Teaching strategies by which the information could be disseminated to participants were developed with practical application and logistical ease as considerations. Underlying the instructional approaches designed was the intent to make participants active learners; the type of learner we wish to develop in primary grade classrooms. The content of the training material is briefly described below. Each phase serves to promote the idea of a comprehensive early childhood program.

Phase 1. Defining and developing appropriate curriculum. The general objective of this phase of the training is that administrators will demonstrate an understanding of developmentally appropriate curriculum scope and sequence for students in kindergarten through third grade. The content of this phase was developed with the experiential and educational background of the participant in mind. Many administrators have had little or no classroom experience as teachers of young children and their knowledge may be based on elementary school classrooms designed for older children (NAEYC,

1987). To educate them in a timely fashion, current research gleaned from reputable educational journals was heavily utilized. Educational literature from traditional early childhood journals as well as journals directed at school administrators is emphasized. State mandates and regulations related to curriculum in kindergarten through third grade are presented in conjunction with recommended standards and policies developed by national educational organizations.

While many reports and recommendations regarding curriculum development are available to early childhood educators, none are capable of addressing specific needs on a per state basis. The phase of training relating to curriculum serves as the catalyst to promote internalization by participants of what the research findings and recommendations can mean to the schools and communities they represent.

Designing curricular structures which demonstrate and support the developmental approach to teaching while addressing state mandated skills per grade level is not an easy task. This phase of training presents a working format to develop such a structure and provides examples for use by administrators in training their respective staff in this process.

To present the information contained in this portion of the module a variety of strategies are utilized. Independent reading assignments, small/large group discussions, video presentations and individual reflective exercises alternate with lecture presentations. The culminating activity of this phase requires the participants to select several of the state's core objectives for grades K-3 and design a unit lesson plan to teach them in a developmentally appropriate manner. As a result of their work, participants generate and discuss questions such as: How can I schedule the time needed during the school day for teachers to develop lessons in this way? How can the principal be a curriculum leader in the school when other assignments such as daily building maintenance and discipline problems often loom larger?

Phase 2. Learning centers as an instructional setting. The general objective of this phase is that school administrators will be able to understand, recognize, and articulate appropriate instructional techniques employed by teachers in kindergarten through third grade.

While many instructional techniques are utilized in early childhood classrooms, learning centers continue to be recognized as a primary means for

teaching kindergarten and primary grade children (ACEI, 1987, NAEYC, 1987). The content of this training phase is concerned with presenting to participants all aspects of learning center development, implementation, and maintenance. Various exercises and audiovisual materials were developed to show participants how and why learning centers are a viable instructional method. For example, an an initial activity, participants are asked to write on index cards their primary concerns about using learning centers. At the conclusion of phase two, the cards are collected and used to generate a discussion that demonstrates to the administrators the knowledge they have gained as they supply their own solutions to the original concerns. Another example involves all of the participants in a role-playing exercise that depicts a faculty meeting where the principal announces that all teachers will begin using learning centers the following grading period. Once again, phase two requires participants to become actively involved in this instructional module through experiences such as designing floor plans for learning center classrooms and by constructing a game or activity that could be used in a center in grades K-3.

Phase 3. Utilizing assessment measures to strengthen a comprehensive early childhood program of

instruction. Wholesale testing of young children to determine the success of the instructional program is a practice most early childhood educators find offensive. Assessment of young children is viewed by many school administrators as necessary to meet state regulations and to produce proof that their school is a good one. With these two viewpoints in mind, this section of the training was written: (1) to inform administrators as to the current research findings and position statements on testing young children, and (2) to present alternatives to one method of assessment as it is acknowledged that program assessment must be conducted. The objectives of this phase of the training module are: to acquaint participants with the basic methods of assessment of young children, to teach participants how to utilize assessment results to improve instructional techniques and strengthen curriculum, and to demonstrate methods of utilizing teacher assessment instruments in improving teacher performance in the classroom.

Construction of activities to sustain participant's interest resulted in combining local and state mandates with information derived from national studies on assessment of preschool and primary grade children. One instance of this type of integrating

activity asks participants to examine the local goals of their early childhood programs, selected objectives from the state-adopted list of mastery skills, and specific items from the test index of instructional objectives from the state-mandated, norm-referenced standardized test. As participants evaluate the degree of consistency between the goals, objectives, and methods of evaluation, they must also begin to explore and design alternative methods of assessing the children's development as well as program and curriculum content.

Phase 4. Developing a practical plan for implementing a comprehensive early childhood instructional program. The final phase of training is one which attempts to help participants develop an individual plan of action to implement the information learned during the previous days of training. The plan serves as a blueprint for building a comprehensive program. In designing his plan, each participant will take into consideration the mission statement of his school district, state regulations relating to instruction and staff development, local school board policies, information presented during the training, and the availability of resources. An example of the action plan format and possible content is given in

Diagram A. This phase also presents information related to the establishment of program ownership by staff, parents, and other school administrators.

Summary

As of May, 1989 over fifty school administrators in the state of Mississippi will have completed the forty-hour training session. Since staff development is required of all teachers and administrators to maintain certification, it is anticipated that by May, 1990 over two hundred administrators will have participated. A core of eleven specially trained individuals, most of whom are public school administrators, will conduct the sessions throughout the summer months and school year.

Training public school administrators to examine and utilize research in the light of day to day experiences of teachers in kindergarten through third grade is not easy. For those involved in good early childhood programs, this type of training serves to affirm a job well done. For those who are skeptical, it provides food for thought and strategies for implementing new ideas.

Diagram A
Plan of Action

Staff Development Goals: To raise the awareness level of K-3 teachers regarding how and what children (K-3) learn as evidenced by position statements and recommendations published by national organizations concerned with young children (Reading, 1989; Math, 1990; Science, 1991; Social Studies, 1992).

Strategies and Time Frame By Which First Year Goals Will Be Met:

CONTENT	DATE	PARTICIPANT	STRATEGY	OUTCOME
Compare MRA/IRA* Position Statement to district reading curriculum and instructional methods (Goal #1).	Fall, 1989	K-3 tchs.	Using staff development, analyze reading curriculum grade by grade then meet as a group (K-3) to report areas needing change and develop and implement plan to make changes.	To align reading curriculum and methods with national recommendations.

Resources: MRA position paper (20 copies); IRA position statement (20 copies); district curriculum guide for reading for each grade (1 copy per teacher); current reading instructional material (texts); district curriculum coordinator and/or building principal; research from module on reading (copy for each teacher).

Plan for Evaluation of Staff Development Goals:
Review current district reading curriculum and lesson plans in area of reading; note specific use of LEA; creative writing; evidence of reading instruction infused into other curricular areas, daily reading to children.

Program Maintenance (Year 2)

Goal: Math, 1990

Strategy: Review NCTM stds. research from module

Outcome: Align math curriculum and methods

*Mississippi Reading Association/International Reading Association

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